

Abolishing Fees Boosts African Schooling

A giant step for children, but governments must navigate the pitfalls

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By eliminating fees, Kenya was able to quickly get 2 million more pupils into its primary schools.

Photograph: Alamy / Kirsty McLaren

When the Kenyan government announced it would stop charging fees for primary school education — just days before the beginning of the 2003 school year — the

result was pandemonium. Teachers, headmasters and parents scrambled to find desks, pencils and books for over a million extra students.

But the policy shift also provided a stepping stone into the record books for 84-year-old Kimani Ng'ang'a Maruge, who, according to the *Guinness Book of World*

Records, became the oldest person ever to enroll in Standard 1 when he appeared before astonished teachers and fellow pupils in 2004. “I wanted to learn how to read the Bible,” an ambition previously frustrated by the high cost of schooling, he later told Voice of America journalist Cathy Majtenyi in 2008. “The preachers mislead people. That is why I am back in school.”

Despite economic hard times and the violence that swept parts of the country after the 2007 elections, UNICEF, the UN children’s agency, reports that the abolition of school fees has had the intended effect of vastly increasing access to education. The number of primary students in Kenya has increased by nearly 2 million.

Encouragingly, the dropout rate, an important measurement of affordability and educational quality, has also fallen. The share of students completing primary school jumped from 62.8 per cent in 2002, the last year fees were charged, to 76.2 per cent two years later as fewer poor children were forced out for nonpayment.

A Step Towards Education For All

These impressive numbers have led most Kenyan educators and their international partners to conclude that the abolition of school fees and the policy reforms that accompanied it have been a success, despite continuing worries about financing, class sizes and teacher quality. In fact, the lifting of fees in Kenya and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa has proved to be a giant step forward for access to education by millions of the region’s poor. It has helped Africa make progress towards its goal of

finding a place in school for all its children.

Over the last 15 years a number of other countries, including Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Ethiopia, Malawi and Mozambique, have also experienced explosive growth in primary school enrolment following the elimination of fees. The UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that between 2000 and 2007 overall primary school enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa

rose by 42 per cent — the greatest rate of increase in the world. As a result, the percentage of African children in primary school increased from 58 to 74 per cent.

A few African countries, including Botswana, Cape Verde, Togo and Mauritius, could achieve universal primary enrolment by 2015, one of the targets in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted by world leaders in 2000 to reduce poverty and advance human well-being across the globe.



To help cover its sudden increase in new enrolments, Kenya reassigned teachers from overstuffed areas to those in greater need of instructors.

Photograph: Alamy / Documentography

But the increase in school attendance is only a start. Despite the surge in enrolment, almost half of the 72 million children out

of school worldwide in 2007 lived in sub-Saharan Africa. Dropout rates in many African countries remain high. Analysts note that

global recession, combined with other urgent problems, has put additional pressure on already meager budgets.

Planning And Finance Are Crucial

The demand for free and universal primary education has its roots in the colonial era, when the colonial authorities restricted African access to schooling, or, as in the case of apartheid South Africa, developed racially segregated and unequal systems. Access to education was therefore a key popular demand at independence, and newly independent governments invested heavily in schools and teachers. Enrolment typically soared, but in the absence of adequate financing and trained teachers and administrators, further expansion proved unsustainable.

Nevertheless, in the years following independence a number

of countries, including Kenya, Malawi and Ghana, attempted to end school fees, but without success. The arrival in the 1980s of austerity policies promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and the resulting reduction of education budgets, often accompanied by increases in fees, is widely considered a major contributor to the continent's low enrolment rates.

In a [detailed analysis](#) of the abolition of primary school fees in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi and Mozambique by the World Bank and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), researchers describe fees as one of the "major barriers" to access to education

for the poor. The [UN's MDG Monitor website](#), which tracks progress towards the goals, estimates that school fees and other mandatory charges, such as uniform costs and dues for parent-teacher associations, consume an average 25 per cent of poor families' household budgets in Africa. But except for the costly fees often assessed on parents in wealthy districts, the sums collected are too small to dramatically improve the quality of learning.

In the view of most education advocates, school fees served more as a barrier to the poor than as a source of finance for good education.

Doing Things Right — And Fast

But abolishing fees, by itself, is not enough. The World Bank/UNICEF study also found that innovative policies and educational reform following the abolition of fees could spell the difference between success and failure. In Kenya, the researchers argued, the government did a

number of things right — and did them quickly.

Like many other efforts to abolish school fees, the initiative came in fulfillment of campaign pledges, in this case by the winner of the December 2002 Presidential election, Mwai Kibaki. But with only a week between the

announcement of the election results and the new school year, the new government went into what the study calls "crisis mode," summoning senior officials of the Education and Finance Ministries, donors and others to map out a strategy for implementing the plan.



The first step was to mobilize support among parents, teachers and administrators. The second was to find the money. The government released \$6.8 mn in

emergency grants — \$380 per primary school — to cover immediate needs like exercise books, pencils and other supplies.

Malawi primary school: The abolition of school fees greatly increased school enrolment, but without sufficient teachers or adequate funding, educational quality suffered.

Photograph: Alamy / Jenny Matthews

Donors stepped up as well, with the World Bank, the Swedish government and others contributing \$82 mn in additional funding over the next two years.

Overall, the government reported, domestic spending on education increased from about \$703 mn in school year of 2001/02 to \$951 mn in 2003/04, a third of the national budget.

With public support and minimum financing set, the government then embarked on a

major overhaul of the primary school financing system. Rather than channel funds through the Education Ministry, the government chose instead to provide student grants directly to individual schools. The schools were required to set up two bank accounts, one for school supplies and another for non-teacher

salaries, building maintenance and the like. Headmasters, teachers and school managers were trained in basic financial management and bookkeeping. The Education Ministry's auditing department was expanded to provide greater oversight.

Teachers And Textbooks

Despite the huge increase in students, the number of teachers in Kenyan primary schools has increased slowly amidst government concerns that hiring large numbers of unqualified teachers would lower instructional quality and increase costs. By reassigning teachers from overstuffed areas to understaffed districts and running some

schools in double shifts, Kenya kept its national pupil-to-teacher ratio from rising beyond 40 to 1 in 2004. Ratios were much higher in some provinces, however.

The government also managed to reach its target of one textbook for every three students in most subjects — an improvement in many poorly performing, largely

rural districts that were not given priority for teachers and supplies before 2003. As a result, 14 of the 21 worst-performing districts in the country slightly improved their student test scores between 2002 and 2005. This evidence, the UN researchers say, shows that combining fee abolition with reforms has had a “positive impact on learning.”

Disparities

That did not mean that the end of school fees and the reforms that followed have solved all of Kenya's education problems. As the UN report notes, the influx of students in 2003 triggered an exodus of wealthier students to private schools, worsening longstanding income disparities within the national education system. Nor has the abolition of

formal fees removed all the burdens from financially strapped families.

“To call it free education is misleading,” Gerald Mwangi, a father of three in central Kenya, told Inter Press Service in early 2009. “For my youngest daughter in Standard 4 I still have to pay for food, transport and uniform,

which adds up to 5,000 shillings [about \$70] per term.”

And although Kenya is credited with maintaining the existing quality of education despite the increase in student population and class sizes, the inability of many students to read and do mathematics at their grade level remains a major concern.

Malawi Struggles To Cope

Other countries have been less successful. Malawi eliminated its school fees in 1994. But with less than half of Kenya's gross domestic product per person and fewer financial and human resources to draw on, it still faces difficult challenges in providing universal primary education.

As in many other African countries, notes the UN study,

“the adoption of universal primary education was triggered by political demands rather than by rational planning processes.” Although Malawi had lifted some fees for Standards 1 and 2 and waived primary education fees for girls prior to 1994, the decision to eliminate all fees coincided with the return of multiparty elections that year. The focus, the

researchers found, was on increasing enrolment. “Very little attention was paid to quality issues.”

Nor was it possible to mobilize public and political support in the short time between the decision to lift fees and the beginning of school. Among Malawi's external partners only UNICEF initially

supported the fee abolition. When over a million new students showed up for class, the study reports, the government found itself struggling to cope “after the fact.”

One immediate response was to hire 20,000 new teachers, almost all of whom were secondary school graduates who were given only two weeks of training. Plans to provide on-the-job training failed to materialize. Instructional

quality declined sharply as the pupil-teacher ratio climbed to 70 to 1.

The lack of facilities meant that many classes met under trees, and books and teaching materials arrived months late, if at all. Despite increases in the education budget, spending per student, already low, declined by about 25 per cent and contributed to the decline in quality. As a result nearly 300,000 students dropped

out during the first year, and high dropout rates continue to this day.

Overall, reports the UN study, only about 20 per cent of boys and girls successfully complete eight years of primary education in Malawi. This is largely a function of the country’s deep poverty, the researchers say, and the lack of resources, such as nutrition programs, to help poor children remain in school.

Time To Innovate And Improve

In the end, say the experts, a dual lesson can be drawn from the Kenyan and Malawian experiences. The abolition of school fees is a precondition for getting large numbers of poor children into school, but it must be accompanied by strong public and political support, sound planning and reform, and increased financing.

After systems adjust to the surge in enrolment, they argue, resources must be directed at improving quality and meeting the needs of the very poor, those in distant rural areas and children

with disabilities. The analysts say that a particular focus should be girls, who face a range of obstacles to attending and staying in school, including cultural attitudes that devalue education for women. Improved sanitation and facilities and better safety and security conditions can make it easier to keep girls in school.

Despite the difficulties, UNICEF primary education specialist Dina Craissati told *Africa Renewal*, governments and donors should see the abolition of school fees and the need to accommodate a flood of new students as catalysts

for innovation and improvement in every aspect of primary education. They also make it necessary to plan for the arrival of hundreds of thousands of additional students in the secondary school system.

“The abolition of school fees should not be seen as a problem, but as an opportunity,” Ms. Craissati said. With careful planning, adequate financing and determined leadership, she concluded, Africa can find a place in school for all its children.

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